



# Electricity, the new bumper crop

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EAST WINDSOR - Ronny Lee's most recent electric bill was a mere \$12.

Not bad for a month's worth of power to run irrigation pumps for his 24-acre farm, power his ice machines and five walk-in freezers, cool his house and light about a dozen farm buildings - power that would have cost as much as \$400 if purchased from his electric company.

The Lee Turkey Farm gets most of its power from 360 solar panels installed last year on the roof of a large barn, allowing him to bypass his electric company for most of his needs.

In fact, on days when his panels produce more power than Lee needs, he sells the excess back to Jersey Central Power & Light Co., sending his meter spinning backward.

Lee is a pioneer, the first New Jersey farmer to take advantage of a program developed by a Flemington company and backed by state and federal programs to promote cleaner energy and help family farmers survive.

"There's never too much sun," said Lance Miller, chief of staff at the New Jersey Board of Public Utilities, which provides rebates covering up to 50 percent of a farm's expense to convert to renewable energy sources and allows them to sell their excess back to utilities.

"Solar and wind power are opportunities for farmers to reduce costs," Miller said.

In addition, the 2002 Farm Bill provides federal grants for up to 25 percent of construction costs to help farmers survive, said Andy Law, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's state director of rural development.

On Monday, Miller and Law joined with Lee and other farmers from around the state, as well as state and federal officials, at Lee's farm in East Windsor.

They were there to review the first year of the program, called the Power Crop Initiative, and to spread the word on a program that has earned New Jersey national praise as a leader in providing incentives and policies to encourage renewable energy.

"Nothing could make more sense than using the sun to generate electricity on farms," said Mark Warner, chief executive of Sun Farm Network, the Flemington company that is working with the New Jersey Farm Bureau to promote solar power in the state.

Farms often have the ideal infrastructure for solar collection, with big, open fields and unshaded barns.

Twelve farms have received a total of \$750,000 from the BPU's rebate program, and six others have applications pending for \$500,000 in rebates, Miller said. When all are completed, they will save 300,000 kilowatt hours a year, enough to power 40 homes.

By itself, that's not going to have much impact on near capacity on the power grid, "but it's a start," Miller said.

Richard Nieuwenhuis, president of the New Jersey Farm Bureau, said the program will have a major impact on helping farmers stay in business.

"We need to keep on having new ways for farmers to make money," he said. That includes saving money through the use of solar power and "energy" crops to feed the growing demand for ethanol and bio-diesel fuels.

"Our farmers' viability is increasingly dependent on innovative ideas and new practices, and energy is a big commodity," Nieuwenhuis said.

Lee, who raises fruits, vegetables, flowers, and turkeys, got involved almost by accident. At a Farm Bureau meeting, he overheard people talking about Sun Farm Network and the solar energy program it developed that required no up-front costs.

"That got my attention," he said.

So Sun Farm conducted a survey of the farm that has been in the Lee family for six generations, dating to 1868, and found the southern exposure on the turkey-filled barn ideally situated for solar energy.

Lee's system, and his 20-year maintenance contract with Sun Farm, cost \$386,000. The panels cover 4,007 square feet of the main barn, providing 75 percent to 85 percent of his electricity needs. Lee pays for the system out of his utility bill savings, and should reach a break-even point in seven to 10 years.

After that - for as much as 20 years - he'll get most of his power for free.

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